

Pre-Conference: The Rise of an Arab-American Cultural Movement

On Friday, April 4, 2008, Arab American artists, cultural leaders, organizers and a diverse group of allies convened to explore the aesthetics, issues, and impact of the rise of an Arab American Cultural Movement that we are currently witnessing/creating. The morning included performances by Arab American theater artists Elmaz Abinader, comedienne Maysoon Ziad, and MC Yassin Alsalman (a.k.a. The Narcicyst). Break-out sessions included dialogues on supporting Arab American and Muslim artists, (Per)FORMing Identity, Arab Americans as People of Color, and the sessions below. Afternoon performances featured a diverse group of artists for whom being Muslim figures prominently in their work: playwright/performer Bina Sharif, poet Rashida Ismaili, and spoken word artist Tahani Salah. The closing plenary, moderated by Sophia Skyles, was on “Artistic Responses to Islamophobia & Wars on/of Terror.”

*Included below are notes from the pre-conference dialogues on **Arab American Hip Hop**, and **Women’s Work: Performing While Female**, as well as **Reflections on breaking letter(s)**, by **Suheir Hammad**, the central full-length performance of *Intersection V*.*

Women’s Work: Performing While Female

Friday April 4, 2008
10:45 AM—12:30 PM

This dialogue was led by Abdul-Rahman Jaradat, Adeeba Rana, and Dalia Basiouny.
20 attendees total; 17 women and 3 men; 15 adults, 3 youth, and 1 elder.

Women artists discussed issues and challenges that arise in work and the juggling of multiple identities.

- Identity tied into work- If your identity is complicated or confused, it’s incorporated into work (i.e. lived experiences, etc.)
- How your work is defined by the “other”- How can your art be the first thing seen? Can it stand on its own?
- There are different places where your identity enters.
- “I have no identity issues. The identity issues are out there.” It’s a social reflection reflected back on the person.
- Freedom to make outside choices without the responsibility to be the voice of all. I cannot determine or say what “we” feel. Don’t confuse the voice, it’s what “I” feel.
 - The external pressure that one represents all.
- We learn about our shared humanity from each other.

- Alliances based on suffering
- Inter- and intra- ethnicities
- Identity as a form of resistance: the example of keeping the title African American writer instead of wanting to simply be called a writer.
- The difference between writer/speaker responsibility and audience/reader responsibility
 - Be active, make decisions. Do not wait on validation or critiques. Langston Hughes once said to make a declaration and validation of your work.
- How to operate within the power structure (subtle or overwhelming)?

An Arab American Hip-Hop Discussion

Friday April 4, 2008

10:45AM—12:15 PM

This session on Arab American Hip Hop featured Will Youmans, a.k.a. MC Iron Sheik, and Yassin Alsaman, a.k.a. The Narcissist, moderated by Leila Denna, UMass student and Hip Hop DJ at WMUA. The conversation focused on the Arab American Hip Hop movement, and the silencing of voices that express identity through Hip Hop art.

There were 15 attendees total; 6 women, 9 men; 3 youth and 12 adults.

- Yassin described his background:
 - Studied political science and communication in college and began to question everything after 9/11.
 - He told an anecdote about the FBI in an Arab conference and his feelings of alienation. He said that he felt they were "feeding me the freedom of my people".
- Arab culture in your life and art:
 - Yassin does not directly say that he is Arab but it's a part of his music.
 - Will says he was raised as Lebanese and then as American.
 - Leila says she did not think about her identity until college.
 - I thought I was white, suppressed identity, I don't speak Arabic.
 - DJ-ing is a space where I can express what I feel.
 - Question from the audience: Is your art political?
 - Yassin: The language has been made political, but my lyrics are not made to be political. Everything is politicized outside of us.
 - Will said he read about a study that indicated that out of 1000 films that portray Arabs and/or Arab-Americans, there were only 30-40 with positive representations.

- For example, in the movie *True Lies* (1994, starring Jaime Lee Curtis and Arnold Schwarzenegger), all of the Arabs die.
 - The movie *Kingdom* (2007, starring Jamie Foxx, Chris Cooper, and Jennifer Garner) features FBI agents sent to Saudi Arabia to stop a terrorist.
 - Also, there are misconceptions about accents, and misrepresentations of cultures/religions.
 - Most movie goers are not aware of these misconceptions and stereotypes.
- The labels “Arabic” and “Islamic” work to pit the two against each other.
 - This is why we must create our own media to demonstrate the humanity in our people.
 - Hip Hop becomes the international link.

Performance Reflections: *breaking letter(s)* by Suheir Hammad

Saturday April 5, 2008

Bowker Auditorium, 8 PM

Intersection V featured the first public performance of ***breaking letter(s)***, written and performed by celebrated poet/activist Suheir Hammad, directed by Andrea Assaf, with movement-chorus performers Zeina Nasr and Dora Arreola, multi-media design by Waleed Zaiter (with Kathryn Touhky and Jordan Steiger), sound design by Leila Denna, and set design by Kamil Peteres. This new multimedia performance was based on Suheir Hammad's latest work, the breaking poems, as well as her journals from Palestine, and the letter (see artist notes below). Three distinctly powerful texts weave together to illuminate experiences of dislocation, from Palestine to Brooklyn, New Orleans to Iraq, and back again. Created in collaboration with media artist Waleed Zaiter, Hip Hop aesthetics meet the politics of dispossession in this courageous and compassionate new work.

Audience Reflection by Lianne O'Shea

338 attendees / 40% Men, 60% Women / 10% youth, 60% middle aged, 20% elderly

As I enter the auditorium, I smell rose incense. The stage is set with what looks like a partial bedroom- a bed, headboard, tables, pillows and candles. The lights drop and the show begins. Hammad begins her story while video projections fill the space and 2 dancers tell her story in

movement around her. Hammad starts her performance with poetry, and she speaks of herself and also where she has come from.

Hammad was born in Jordan to Palestinian refugee parents. She moved to Brooklyn, NY when she was young and grew up surrounded by different cultures. Suheir says that she always identified with her Palestinian roots—she shows us a picture of herself as a child with the Palestinian flag flying behind her like Superman’s cape. She has always felt a connection to God through her writing. Hammad goes on to tell us of her return trip to Palestine. She speaks of the red tape and annoying questioning at the border, only to be taken on a 3 minute ride to her destination. She speaks of her family who still lives in the Middle East and her cousins who welcomed her into their home.

Hammad also speaks of the war in Iraq, and the toll it takes on our culture and on our freedom in the U.S., and its toll on the people of the Middle East. She speaks of how this war affects young people in this country and what they are supposed to think of their nation and their identity. Hammad easily moves from slam poetry, to creating scenes with the dancers, to breaking the fourth wall with her audience. She finishes the piece with beautiful imagery of a rainbow cloth being stretched across the auditorium to a standing ovation.

The following statements were included in the conference program:

Artist’s Statement by Suheir Hammad

breaking letter(s) is moment and space where narratives and identities reflect. The script is being created from three primary texts, the earliest of which was a journal I kept while in Palestine in 2004. Upon returning from that trip, I attempted to write a letter in the tradition of Albert Camus’ *Letter to a German Friend*. I imagined the letter addressing the apathy, ambivalence, and passive aggression I felt when talking to many about Palestine, but specifically I wanted to direct my questions and compassion towards Jewish American friends and their families. I read much about many things. There will be a bibliography with the program for April 5th performance. The *breaking poems* series began not long after, is still ongoing, and completes the trinity of works sweated out for the script.

Director’s Notes by Andrea Assaf

Suheir Hammad is a writer and performer who has emerged as one of the world’s most eloquent and important contemporary voices – a gifted poet who transforms language with grace,

reveals truth and beauty even in the brutal, and holds multiple realities with clarity, grace and compassion. Through her evocative imagery, complex and compelling mix of cultural idioms, and the sheer power of her artistry, she has become an icon of the Hip Hop generation and a leading figure in the theatrical genre known as Future Aesthetics. New WORLD Theater's decision to support, produce and present this new work is directly in line with our mission to foster the creation of theater that offers first-voice representation by/of/for people of color, and cultural expressions often marginalized or suppressed by dominant U.S. culture.

For arts organizations, it is not easy to support work of this kind. In the current political climate, it is difficult to find funding for art that speaks from a Palestinian perspective, or that frames the occupation of Palestine in a larger political context of injustice, and makes connections to histories and communities of resistance around the world. Presenters and producers may feel that it's "risky" or, in some cases, have directly experienced loss of funding because of the choice to support Palestinian artists. These issues of what kind of work receives support and what does not, based on political content, become issues of de-facto censorship. This challenges us, as cultural leaders who work for progressive change, to develop networks of colleagues and organizations that are willing to work together to ensure that such work is supported, and presented nationally, so as not to contribute to the silencing that looms around our communities.

In the June 2005, an early version of Suheir Hammad's project was supported by NWT's annual summer playlab. In 2007-08, we have continued development, from a staged reading to a full production. Many things have happened in our world(s) in these years between: the Ashkal Alwan conference in Beirut in Fall '05; the bombing of Lebanon in summer '06; the continuing U.S. occupation of Iraq; the flooding of New Orleans; the invasion of Somalia; Suheir's subsequent trips to Palestine; the building of the Wall, the starvation of Gaza, and much, much more.

In directing a piece such as *breaking letter(s)*, one encounters the challenge of artfully differentiating the critique of policy from the demonization of a people or culture. One encounters the challenge of creating theater that engages issues of great political complexity, in which a balance must be sought between imparting information (of which the artists can never integrate enough to fully educate or contextualize) and revealing an internal world that comprehends and expresses truth in a radically different way.

breaking letter(s) is courageous work; it is also necessary work. Three powerful texts weave together on stage to illuminate experiences of dislocation, creating three distinct worlds of

being and (dis)embodiment. The “wrighting” of *breaking letter(s)* as a theater work has included a dialogic process between director and writer – selecting the performance text from much larger bodies of written work and articulating a structure for their interrelationship; exploring the notion of a contemporary chorus, and how the chorus might function differently in each of the three worlds; and collaborating with media and design artists who bring their own unique visual and sonic interpretations to the material, and whose individual contributions profoundly affect the worlds that are ultimately created. It’s a collaboration of aesthetically diverse artists who’ve come together in a very condensed period of time, in a shared exploration of what it means to “break.”

On April 5, *Intersection* conference participants will witness the first public showing of *breaking letter(s)*. This is a beginning, an exploration, a sharing and offering. I hope you will engage with the piece presented on Saturday, and consider attending the Artistic Praxis session on Sunday morning, to join a dialogue about the project that will inform the continuing artistic evolution of this work.